

SKI CLUB FEATURE

**FRIENDS OF VALLEY SPUR and
CAPITAL REGION NORDIC ALLIANCE**



CRNA.inc
Capital Region Nordic Alliance

BY LOU DZIERZAK

FRIENDS OF VALLEY SPUR

Located in the Hiawatha National Forest near Munising, Michigan, the 27-mile Valley Spur ski trail system offers local skiers more than a dozen loops to explore. Blessed with deep lake-effect snow from Lake Superior, the trail system is open from mid-December to late April.

The Friends of Valley Spur has worked with the U.S. Forest Service since 1992 to assist with trail maintenance, welcoming skiers at the trail's lodge and hosting events. The nonprofit Friends of Valley Spur finances its work with trail fees, donations, and special events. An eight-person executive board manages the club with hundreds of hours of support from a committed network of volunteers.

As the local trail system evolved to a broader regional network, Friends of Valley Spur began serving a larger audience of cross country skiers.

"Our club membership started with local people who used the trail system. Now we have a significant number of people coming from Wisconsin's Fox River Valley and Milwaukee," reports club president Dave Worell. "We are changing the make-up of our club

because we are attracting a wider range of people interested in cross country skiing here."

Although the trail system may open later than some Midwestern locations, the area is blessed with good consistent snow conditions. Average snowfall is 180 inches and often over 200 inches. "Our average open date is the 15th of December," says Worell. "On the other end of the season, we groomed trails in 2013 until the first weekend in May." Volunteers groom trails for skate and classic ski disciplines.

Taste & Glide

Ski clubs across the country share a common passion for cross country skiing. Thousands of club members offer an incredible willingness to volunteer time and resources to manage their local trails.

What makes every club unique is a signature event. For Valley Spur, the annual Taste & Glide combines the best of cross country skiing and gourmet food. Held the first Saturday in March, skiers pay a small fee to sample different food items from tables that are set up along the trail. Catered by Sydney's Restaurant every year since the club's founding, the trailside gourmet offerings include delicacies like chocolate covered strawberries. Live music in the lodge adds to the day's festive atmosphere. The Taste & Glide event attracts more than 200 participants. "We've learned what foods work best on the trails and what people enjoy trying," says Worell.

In addition to the Taste & Glide, Friends of Valley Spur also hosts two winter races, the Eki Loppet and the Snow-Man Duathlon. The club is also entering its third year of offering cross country ski lessons to kids 5-18. "When we first posted the schedule, mothers in the community spread the word. The kids program has been a huge success," says club director John Gierke.



Mission of Friends of Valley Spur
The mission of the Friends of Valley Spur is to provide non-motorized recreation opportunities on the Hiawatha National Forest Valley Spur trail system. The Friends of Valley Spur believe that the future of skiing and bicycling is in the children, and are committed to running programs that teach and encourage both summer and winter use of the trail.



Mission of CRNA

To provide complete access to its Nordic sports for all populations, particularly those with special needs or who are disabled, providing comprehensive education to ensure maximal health benefits to all.

CAPITAL REGION NORDIC ALLIANCE

A New Model for Spreading Nordic Love

Frustrated with declining participation and interest in winter sports, Russ Myer crafted a creative way to reverse those trends.

Three years ago Myer brought together leaders from other winter sports to launch the Capital Region Nordic Alliance, Inc., in Albany, New York. The CRNA is a not-for-profit outdoor recreation alliance focusing on year-round integrated activities in the Nordic sports of biathlon, orienteering, snowshoeing, and cross country skiing.

“In the 1980s and ’90s there were over 10 million skiers. Cross country skiing enjoyed a tremendous ride. But for a number of reasons we find ourselves struggling today,” says Myer. “We felt putting together an alliance to offer Nordic sports year-round could reverse a trend of lost membership and lost identity with Nordic sports would be an effective strategy.”

As a first step to developing the alliance, Myer gathered nationally recognized leaders in each of the sports. “We have sports leaders who are well-versed in their sports but recognize the need for

volunteers and realize the benefits interdependence can bring to the sport,” says Myer. “We wanted to take our race management expertise, marketing experience, and love of community building surrounding these wonderful sports to agencies, vendors, and venues to help reverse the trend of lost participation and raise the awareness of Nordic winter sports.”

Rather than trying to attract new skiers to come to a Nordic center, Myer and his team have reached out to other nonprofit and community based programs throughout the entire region, including parts of Vermont and Massachusetts, as well as eastern and northern New York.

CRNA also works with organizations to bring their sports to people with disabilities and special needs. CRNA works with members of the USA Paralympics Nordic team to prepare them for competition, as well as 6-8 year olds with special needs.

“Many organizations are limited in their expertise and ability to put on diverse events,” says Myer. “We work with them to create events such as paintball biathlon courses that are appropriate for people in wheelchairs or who may be recovering from strokes.” CRNA uses a contracting

business model. Nonprofits pay CRNA fees to develop and manage events and ongoing programs based on winter sports activities.

Myer works with the host organization as well as exploring tie-in marketing opportunities and sponsorships from affiliated organizations and foundations to raise funds to help pay for CRNA programs.

“The contract model has been very effective and positive. Our work changes attitudes and shows how we can integrate and blend our sports into the entire community,” says Myer. “Everyone derives a sense of accomplishment and appreciation for people who participate in our sports.”

Important CRNA partners have included: Albany Police Athletic League, Stride Adaptive Sports, Sunnyview Rehabilitation Hospital, Bus Stop Club, Albany Housing Coalition, and U.S. Paralympics.

Key leaders within the CRNA and their respective discipline include: Russ Myer, biathlon; Stephen Wilson, cross country skiing; Phil Hawkes-Teeter, orienteering; and Tom Wright, snowshoeing. **CCS**